



Advancing abilities for people with special needs since 1951

Testimony to the Appropriations Committee
Office of Early Childhood - February 17, 2022

I am writing to comment on House Bill 5037 AAC the State Budget for the Biennium
Ending June 30th, 2023

From: Karen Feder
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To: Members of the Appropriations Committee:

My name is Karen Feder, and I am the Director of the Abilis Early Learners Birth to Three program located here in Fairfield County. We are a non-profit organization providing services to more than 800 children and adults with differing abilities across lower Fairfield County, in Connecticut.

The Abilis Early Learners program meets the developmental needs of infants and toddlers from birth to 3 years of age who have developmental delays, disabilities and/or Autism. Our team, like other providers in the state, are key partners with families to meet the needs of their children and to help them advance their development. This starts with evaluations and assessments, to treatment and developing and implementing a plan to help them transition to the community, outpatient services and/or school systems. Our program is built around the foundation that parents are their children's first teacher and child's best advocate. We need to support parents and provide them with all the tools they need to best communicate about and advocate for their children. This is becoming more and more difficult with the funding challenges we are currently facing.

Not identifying children in need of early intervention services or struggling to deliver services to those who are eligible, is not only tragic for the child, but has negative impacts for their communities and the economy. Making investments in early childhood education reduces deficits and strengthens the economy. Early Intervention can change and impact the trajectory of a child's future.

Connecticut Birth to Three programs have not had a rate increase or rate review in the last 5 years, since rates were initially established in 2017, nor have programs received any direct ARPA payments to provide financial relief from COVID. Birth to Three programs are covering many expenses that are not reimbursable but nonetheless are necessary. Because we are a fee for service system, when families must cancel, a service cannot be provided but my program still must pay me for that planned time of day in spite of not having that revenue. The Birth to three programs must still provide

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the technology and materials needed to do the work, whether families cancel or not. My program cannot afford to absorb any more of these costs. I'm here because I love working with the Birth to Three families and have been working at Abilis for 34 years building a strong program for children and their parents. Please help programs like mine be able to afford to keep professional and devoted staff. The infants, toddlers and their caregivers need it, want it, and are entitled to the services we provide.

The next planned rate review is still 2 years away, meaning we will not have had any rate adjustments for **7 years!** Programs are dealing with the ever-increasing costs related to basic benefits for staff, including the challenge of paying competitive wages to attract and retain staff in times when there is also an extreme workforce shortage in early intervention. We need help! In addition, the increased funding (4%) for non-profits agreed to last legislative session DID NOT include Birth to Three Services.

These funding challenges directly impact all Birth to Three programs in Connecticut and almost 10,000 children and families by extension. Staffing vacancies directly impact families which causes extreme service delays, staff burnout, and more. If something doesn't change quickly, the families in our program might not receive the services that they need and deserve in a timely way.

Please help Abilis and its Birth to Three program and other essential Birth to Three programs by:

- Including Birth to Three services as part of any Cost-of-Living Adjustment in the budget
- Revising regulations to provide timely and predictable rate increases for programs to account for doing business in Connecticut.
- Revising funding streams to support short-term and long-term General Administrative Payment increases.
- Immediately increasing Birth to Three rates by 10% to help sustain all Early Intervention agencies in Connecticut.

We respectfully ask that you remember Abilis Inc. and other Birth to Three programs during the upcoming legislative session. We are providing essential services without adequate rates to sustainably continue to fund our services so we can continue to help this most vulnerable population in Connecticut.

Thank you,

Karen Feder
Director of Therapeutic Services

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